(Re)constructing imagined identities in language cafés: an ethnographic inquiry

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Despite their growing popularity, language cafés have not received the same research attention as other second or foreign language contexts outside of formal education. Drawing on ethnographic data from a three-year fieldwork conducted in a university language café, this paper aims to draw attention to language cafés as significant social contexts for multilingual identity performance and development. In particular, underpinned by a poststructuralist view of identity, the findings show different ways in which participants (re)construct their imagined multilingual identities in interaction with others in the language café environment, where subject positions are not constrained by institutional roles (e.g. student and teacher).

Keywords: language cafés; language socialisation; imagined identities.

Introduction

'Language café' (LC) is used here as an umbrella term to designate any group that provides non-formal regular events for individuals to practise their foreign or second language(s) (LX[1]) by interacting with others. They are non-formal because they do not provide any formal instruction as such, and they do not belong to any institutional programme. The events are generally organised by volunteers and in public spaces, such as bars, libraries, cafés, etc. Despite the opportunities for meaningful LX socialisation that these events seem to foster, LCs have not received the same research attention as other learning contexts outside of formal instruction. This is even more so with regards to contexts where English is not the target language.

This paper addresses one of the emerging themes from a doctoral research project which investigates ethnographically and from an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004) the affordances for multilingual and intercultural identity development in a LC in North England (UK). In particular, by looking at how learners make sense of their experiences in the LC, this paper will shed light on the ways in which the LC affords the (re)construction of learners' imagined (multilingual) identities.

[1] The use of 'LX' instead of 'L2', and 'L1 user' instead of 'native speaker', follows the recommendations by Jean-Marc Dewaele (2018) in his article entitled 'Why the Dichotomy 'L1 Versus LX User' is Better than 'Native Versus Non-native Speaker'.

An ecological approach to language learning

The way I approach the study of language socialisation in the non-instructional setting of LCs draws on the 'ecology' metaphor, 'which captures the dynamic interaction between language users and the environment as between parts of a living organism' (Kramsch, 2002, p. 3). Thus, an ecological approach sees L2 development as a result of meaningful participation in human events (van Lier, 2004); that is, a complex, non-linear, dynamic and emergent process that is based on the interactions and interrelations between the learners and their ecosystem (Kramsch, 2002; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; van Lier, 2004). An ecological perspective, therefore, avoids simple cause-effect relationships and aims at exploring the interconnectedness of different elements in the ecosystem. With this approach, I also embrace the perspective that there is no separation between language acquisition and language socialisation.

Language cafés as a complex and under-researched context

While everyone has an idea of what the ecosystem of a classroom may look like, people refer to very different realities when they use the term 'language café' (or any of its equivalent denominations). LCs are too diverse to be portrayed as a homogeneous type of event, since they often differ in the key dimensions that, according to Benson (2011), ought to be considered when researching language learning beyond the classroom:

- location: where the activity takes place;
- formality: the degree to which the learning is aligned with an institutional programme;
- pedagogy: the extent to which teaching practices are involved; and
- locus of control: the extent to which learners self-manage their environment.

In this regard, in some LCs the organisers take up the role of teacher-facilitators during the conversations (and may even charge for it) and, on the other side of the spectrum, in other LCs, all participants share an equal status in the management and negotiation of their interactions. The LCs involved in my study belong to the latter group. Nevertheless, these dimensions should be considered as fluid and negotiable processes, rather than static settings in the environment. Furthermore, in the case of LCs, another important dimension to consider might be how stable or transient these groups are, since this interferes with the affordances these environments may be able to provide.

Previous research on different informal language learning meetups has mostly been limited to contexts of English as a foreign language (EFL), unlike the UK-based LCs in my study, where people gather to speak different languages other than English. Due to the socioeconomic status of English as a global language, some scholars have argued that research findings from EFL contexts might not always apply to other language contexts, for instance, when it comes to learning motivations (Duff, 2017).

In Turkey, Balçıkanlı (2017) shows how the English Café is perceived as a place (1) to practise English, (2) to socialise, (3) to exchange knowledge and life experiences, (4) to learn from others and (5) a safe place to take risks and deal with feelings and emotions. In Japan, Murray and Fujishima (2016) gather narratives from different stakeholders in the L-café, a university facility which provides a space for Japanese and international students to practice their languages (mainly English) informally. In a later study, they focus on aspects of participant entry, access, and belonging in this same social learning environment (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2017). These recent studies, however, feature LCs where teacher-facilitators intervene to enhance the learning experience, unlike the LC in my study, where the groupings and conversations are completely spontaneous and self-managed by participants.

In China, Gao (2009) studied participant experiences in an English Club through the thematic analysis of their spontaneous webforum 'reflective experiential accounts'. These accounts revealed perceptions of the English club as a place for supportive peer-learning, self-assertion and changes in self-perception. Gao (2009), thus, reclaims a more humanistic approach to language teaching whereby social relationships are promoted, so as to help learners sustain their autonomous learning efforts. Building up on Gao's qualitative work, Liu (2013) uses statistical data to study the development of students' self-efficacy as a result of participating in a Chinese university English Bar. Self-efficacy is defined in that context as 'students' perceived capability to conduct effective verbal communications with native and non-native speakers' of the target language (Liu, 2013, p. 28). However, I will argue that interacting in LCs goes beyond engaging in effective communication. Participating in LCs is about LX socialisation more broadly and, as such, it involves the embodied experience of performing one's full social being in another language, and not just one's student self.

Imagined identities and language learning

This paper draws on a poststructuralist understanding of identities as multiple and dynamic; in other words, identities are subject to a life-long process of non-linear transformation, and they are always complex, socially constructed, and historically situated (Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2013; Norton-Peirce, 1995; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; van Lier, 2004). In line with a social constructionist approach, this study assumes that people construct and re-construct their sense of self in interaction with others. Through social interaction people position themselves, and are positioned by others, in relation to the social world around them (Kramsch, 2009).

With an encompassing view of multilingualism, any individual who is engaged in additional language learning or usage can be considered as a 'multilingual speaker', regardless of the number of languages they speak or their level of competence (Fisher, Evans, Forbes, Gayton, & Liu, 2018). The importance of developing a multilingual identity has been associated with the positive impact it has over learners' effort investment in learning and maintaining their languages, and with its potential to enhance social cohesion in nowadays increasingly diverse

societies (Fisher et al., 2018). Although the classroom can be an effective first site for learners to come into contact with their subjectivities as multilingual speakers (Kramsch, 2009), it is when learners start living the LX from within, rather than studying it as an objective reality that exists at a distance, that they start seeing themselves as *languagers* and full social beings in the material worlds that surround that language (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004).

Furthermore, the importance of projecting oneself in the future has been recognised as central to the lives of many LX learners, since imagined or desired identities also have an impact on individuals' motivation to learn and, most importantly, in how invested learners are in the language (Norton, 2013). According to Norton, motivation, like identity, cannot be seen as a static feature in the learner. Moreover, a highly motivated learner might be unsuccessful because of the unequal power relations they encounter in communication with target language speakers. Norton (2000) proposes the concept of 'investment' as a sociological alternative to the psychological construct of 'motivation'. As she puts it,

> if learners "invest" in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money), which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. As the value of language learners' cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves, their hopes for the future, and their imagined identities are reassessed. Hence there is an integral relationship between investment and identity, an identity which is theorized as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle. (Norton, 2013)

Considering all of the above, the main question addressed in this paper is: How do face-to-face interactions in the LC contribute to participants' (re)construction of selves and their imagined identities?

Methods

My research contributes to the groundbreaking literature on LCs by studying these environments from a complex researcher positioning. Rather than being a detached observer, I participated in the LC events as a genuine LX user and learner, drawing on my multilingual self as a resource in all the stages of the ethnographic research (Holmes, Fay, Andrews, & Attia, 2013, 2016).

I collected ethnographic data over a period of three years in two different LCs, where I actively participated as a multilingual speaker, with a particular interest in improving my French speaking skills. I kept a record of my experiences in a reflective journal which reached approximately 35,000 words; I audio-recorded around seven hours of naturally-occurring conversations in the LCs, and conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants, eight of whom also completed short written reflections about their experiences in the LC. For the purpose of further data triangulation, I also gathered fieldnotes based on my observations of two LC sessions where I participated as a complete observer. Audio-

recorded data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All informants have pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. In order to provide a clear focus, in this paper I will draw on the interview data from only one of the two LCs I investigated, namely the university LC.

This university LC is located in North England and is organised by university teachers. It takes places twice per term at the student union bar, and thus attracts mainly university students. As any extracurricular activity at the university, the LC is not attached to any study programme and attendance is voluntary. This LC is multilingual, in that it is aimed at practising different languages during the same evening. An important characteristic of this LC is that most conversation groups during the events are self-managed by participants without the intervention of any designated group facilitators. Groups tend to include speakers with mixed abilities in the target language(s), which affords the emergence of pedagogic episodes of collaborative peer learning. This diversity, I will argue, also affords meeting inspiring others and the reconstruction of multilingual imagined identities.

(Re)constructing one's imagined identities in the LC

The findings show that participants reconstruct their imagined identities in LCs as a result of meaningful socialisation experiences in their LX. This is connected to the fact that these experiences often trigger a change in learners' self-perception as multilingual speakers, or prompt their self-projection as successful multilinguals inspired by more competent others. In both cases, feelings of reassurance support their imagining of new and encouraging possibilities for their future selves.

Imagined identities through changes in self-perception

Participants in this university LC conceptualise the environment and their experiences in it around a main underlying idea: a sense of freedom. Because most of these participants are students, the classroom seems to be the most immediate context with which they tend to compare the LC environment. Thus, they frequently remark that people in the LC are free to stay as long they want, talk about anything they want, and make mistakes without the judgment of a teacher.

Yet freedom also involves that, as opposed to the classroom, the LC represents an unguided and unpredictable social space, which might be daunting for many first-timers. This is why self-doubt before attending the LC (e.g.: Is my level good enough? Will I fit in?) is very frequent. However, by the end of the event, self-doubt sentiments tend to transform into a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement (e.g.: I did it! I have spoken for over an hour in [language]!), which seems to be directly related with self-assurance and motivation to take up on new challenges in the future, as illustrated by the two interview comments below:

> [This sense of satisfaction] makes you want to do more, and makes you think like "oh, next time I'm gonna do this and it's gonna be…" or "next time I'm gonna be even better!" (Amy)
> When somebody speaks really well and has a really good [accent]… Well, actually, I don't think it comes from listening to other people that are better, I think it comes from just enjoying it and wanting to do better next time. […] So it's like… happy with the things you've done… it's like 'I know I've made a lot of mistakes too, but next time I don't wanna do that [laughter]'. (Rebecca)

For Amy, the LC experience has set a precedent of successfully managing an informal social event in Spanish for the first time. Having this precedent in mind, she is now able to imagine a future self taking up new challenges and performing even better. Those who have experienced a sports achievement, such as running 10K for the first time, will be familiar with this type of post-event motivation boost. However powerful, it is important to acknowledge that this type of self-assurance can be also very ephemeral and does not necessarily translate into long-term, sustained motivation.

Rebecca, on the other hand, is an invested polyglot and regular attendee whose experiences in the LC are always related to reconnecting with the joy of speaking languages, which keeps her imagination as a future fluent LX user alive.

Imagined identities through self-projection in others

LC participants have a tendency to tacitly map their interlocutors' approximate levels of proficiency during the first minutes of interaction with others in the LC. By comparing with each other, they are constantly reassessing and adjusting their positionings, self-perception and self-projection as multilinguals. In relation to this, and slightly related to learning motivation, 'jealousy' is frequently mentioned in interview comments as a feeling that emerges in interaction with more competent others in the LC:

> Whenever they [other LC participants] are actually doing a language degree and they talk better than me, I accept it, but I'm very jealous at the same time, 'cos I'm like 'I wish I could talk like that!' (Elisabeth)

What Elisabeth implies is that with time and investment she believes she could be as fluent as those successful speakers she meets in the LC. Interacting with advanced LX users can arguably support the construction of her imagined identities based on attainable goals, which move away from the unattainable model of the native speaker.

On the other hand, fluent speakers in the LC can also see themselves projected retrospectively in those who are on the first stages of their learning. In the following excerpt,

Nathan recalls a conversation with a beginner student, and how he could identify with his puzzlement when interacting with an advanced LX user:

> (…) cuando le dije que estaba en Stage 6, me vio como… ¡pues eso es otro mundo, sabes! (…) En francés antes cuando yo no tenía tanto nivel, y yo veía a gente que tenía… no sé, que hablaba muy bien, aunque no fuera muy bien, ¡ya para mí era increíble! (Nathan)
> *(…) when I told him that I was in Stage 6, he looked at me like… that's a different world, you know! (…) In French, when I was not that fluent and I saw somebody with… I don't know, speaking very well, even if it was not that well, for me that was already incredible! (Nathan)*

Nathan then goes on to explain that, just like others inspired him in the past, he really enjoys now being a source of inspiration and motivation for others in the LC. He shows empathy with those who are starting their learning paths as a way to be reciprocal retrospectively.

Other examples of inspiring others often emerge in interaction with older and more experienced LX users. When asked about a memorable moment from an LC, Molly recalls a conversation from her hometown LC with a woman who successfully embedded multilingual practices in her professional career:

> (…) she was just saying how much she enjoyed being able to speak both her languages in the office, and it kind of just introduced the idea of being able to… maybe I could work in the UK and in France. (Molly)

At the time of that conversation, Molly was about to start her modern languages degree at university. This woman had a powerful, inspirational effect on Molly's construction of her imagined identities as a future professional with the rewarding experiences of working in multilingual environments and dwelling in languages.

Discussion

The findings show that interacting with others in LCs does not only involve information exchange, but participants are constantly reorganising a sense of who they are and their desires for the future; that is, through participation, they engage in the construction and reconstruction of selves and their imagined identities (Norton, 2013; Norton-Peirce, 1995; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Some participants, like Molly, feel inspired by others to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan speakers with a 'nomadic and borderless lifestyle' (Ros i Solé, 2013, p. 326). The reconstruction of selves and the development of imagined identities as multilinguals are, therefore, intersubjective processes that are not anchored in the individual's mind, but embedded in the sociality of LX learning (Ros i Solé, 2016). These processes are also afforded by the ecologies of the LC as a peer-learning environment, where reciprocity and empathy provide the power-balanced ground that some learners need to feel free to exercise their agency as LX users.

Rather than just practising their LX, the findings suggest that LC participants engage in *languaging*, understood as the 'full, embodied and engaged interaction with the world that comes when we put the languages we are learning into action' and 'the effort of *being* a person in that language in the social and material world of everyday interactions' (Phipps, 2007, p. 12, my emphasis). Whereas we cannot underestimate the value of systematic learning in the classroom (Woodin, 2018), the ecologies of the LC environment afford the full embodied experience of informal language socialisation and the emotions associated with it. Rewarding social experiences in the target language mobilise a new sense of self as a multilingual speaker in a way that goes far beyond the satisfaction that one might get from a good grade. Thus, as language educators we should ask ourselves: How does my programme support students' experiences of *languaging*?

Finally, Risager (2006) points to the discussion of how we 'ought to upgrade and include non-native speakers as linguistic models in language teaching and language practice' (p. 130). The term 'native speaker' has been widely critiqued for its racist connotations (Holliday, 2006), and for revealing a monolingual bias and perpetuating a deficit model in language learning, whereby non-native speakers are defined by what they did not achieve (Cook, 1999; Dewaele, 2018). Byram (1997) argues that the native speaker model sets an impossible target for learners and evaluates the wrong kind of competence; instead, language learners should aim at becoming intercultural speakers. The findings in my study suggest that, in the LCs, successful LX users can act as role models and a powerful source of inspiration for learners, as they support the reconstruction of learners' imagined future identities based on achievable goals that move away from the unattainable model of the native speaker.

Conclusions

This paper reported on one of the salient themes emerging from an ethnographic inquiry into the affordances for languaging and the development of multilingual identities in a multilingual LC in North England. In particular, it explored the ways in which LC participants reconstruct their imagined identities and their sense of self as multilinguals as a result of their socialisation experiences in LCs. Thanks to the particular ecologies of these environments, characterised by the absence of the traditional teacher and student roles, and supported by a shared, strong sense of reciprocity and empathy, LC participants often undergo a change in self-perception as LX users as they experience the enjoyment of how it feels to socialise and create new human connections in another language (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). These new human connections, in turn, are often a great source of inspiration which prompts participants' self-projection of imagined identities as successful multilingual and cosmopolitan speakers. These changes in self-perception and self-projection in others encompass feelings of reassurance which support their LX learning efforts and investment, as they imagine new and encouraging possibilities for their future multilingual selves (Norton, 2013).

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